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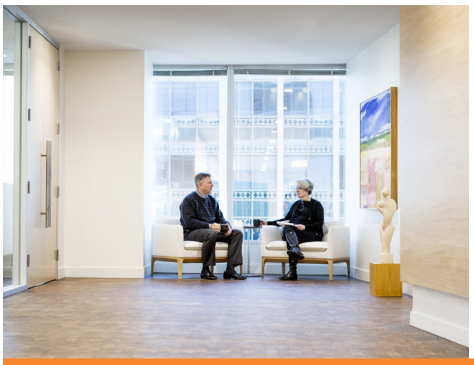

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Why "Our Couples"?

BY RANDY STERN

Here we are – the first Love and Marriage issue of 2023.

It is true that the key to the vibrancy of our community is the love we share with our very significant others. Whether we are bound by marriage or just started dating, we honor and cherish those who have agreed to be a part of a singular existence.

A singular existence that still makes people unhappy.

Not going to call out groups of people here. Why bother acknowledging their objection to love? There's nothing wrong with loving someone, right?

The core tenet of our Love and Marriage issues is to celebrate the love that exist within our community. This is why we open up these pages or scroll through the website! We want to see happy couples talking about what love means to them.

As I stated before, there is another point of view on love. In some cultures, the kind of love we share within our community still creates friction between "us" and "them". That is why

Photo by Tiffany J. Lor

we have featured a couple who left Ukraine for a better life here. It is important to remind ourselves that our resilience and determination as a culture and community is driven by love – and the freedom in expressing love.

Isn't that point of our celebration of Valentine's Day? Our anniversary of our first date? Our wedding anniversary? The number of love songs that have filled your Spotify playlist or smartphone's music app?

All of these remind us of that single fact that love is what keeps our community going.

Take a look at the other couples we featured in this issue. Just look at their faces, you see bliss, happiness, joy, struggle, pain…and love.

Within this issue, we have several examples of our couples that exemplify all of the above. They range from the recently wedded to those of been with each other for years. WE let them tell their story to you. Maybe you'll be inspired?

We also include a couple that should be part of our community. This couple had multiple challenges before and after their arrival into our community. It is worth the read, as well.

We have so many couples we want to celebrate. We feel that in every issue, we may have run our course. Not true. That is why we will put out an "all call" for you to be featured in our Love and Marriage issues, when they come up. Because of you, we publish them to share with your family, friends, co-workers…the world! ∎

Bama, Boundaries, Baker and the Blues

BY E.B. BOATNER

Pearl Cleage's found family is like every other– yet unique. *Now*, is Summer, 1930, Harlem, where thousands of Blacks have joined the Great Migration north, fleeing Jim Crow segregation to seek jobs, opportunities, *freedom*. They're four; Guy, Angel, and Delia rent two apartments, while Sam, older, lives elsewhere, but spends many hours with the trio, particularly Delia.

Guy, a gay costume designer shares with Angel, a talented but mercurial, alcohol-fueled nightclub singer, who's just been fired. Into the opening scene lurches Guy, steering a near-blotto Angel home after getting the boot. A stranger approaches, offers to help. Angel encounters Leland, fresh from conservative, small-town Alabama, a greenhorn in the rowdy, anything-goes Harlem the others now navigate easily.

Leland comes 'round again, and Angel sees a possible solution to her financial woes. Guy's kind, but committed to his career…and gay. Leland, smitten by Angel's resemblance to his late wife, presses suit. Angel responds.

Guy is willing to do what it takes to get to Paris where his muse Josephine is already a *succès fou*. Guy assiduously create gowns on spec, writes Josephine often, but will she respond? He's offered to buy Angel a ticket to Paris, give her time to regroup, but Angel craves security, not dreams.

Delia, across the hall, is mild, but neither meek nor unfocused. A feminist, she's looking to found a Margaret Sanger Family Planning Clinic there in Harlem. Sam is a medical doctor, the only aid available to many Black women during a pregnancy or its termination.

Angel rushes headlong through life. Opening a package, she snaps up a red dress meant for Delia and pulls it on, sashaying about assuring Delia how much better she can wear it. Delia cedes, yet shortly after, Angel appears in Leland's gift of a more "modest" dress, acutely aware upon which side she's buttering her bread.

Leland voices his disapproval of homosexuals, of women's rights, alcohol and any other of Harlem's social and religious sins he encounters. He rejoices to learn Angel is pregnant, "a son!" oblivious to her reaction. She calls, enlists Sam.

All does not resolve as the viewer expects, though the characters hew to their innate patterns of behavior, as many will in any such group. Angel's terror at being left "a broke old woman" leaves no room for remorse, and her attempt at self-preservation brings destruction for some, while others, constitutionally more adaptable, move on.

Cleage crafts each character with crystalline accuracy, attaining a double-edged impact that these stories hold in their timelessness. The Harlem denizens, the gob-smacked Alabamian are not exotic insects held up for today's scientific scrutiny, but hark back to one's own past…"Our bunch in the 60s…" Guy, Angel, Sam, Delia all initially behave as their nature dictates, and, as ever, some rise to success, fail, or walk their treadmill to the end

What price will you pay for freedom? Once you've paid, what will you do with it? Some carry on, some don't–or can't. *Blues for an Alabama Sky* targets problems still unresolved nearly 100 years on: racism, homophobia, misogyny, women's bodily autonomy. How did members of your found family fare? And you?

A brilliant and unforgettable evening of theater, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* will play on the Guthrie's Wurtle Thrust Stage through March 12. ∎

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The Fox Cities, Wisconsin
A River Runs Through It

BY CARLA WALDEMAR

Appleton Downtown. Photo courtesy of The Fox Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau.

A river runs through it….and river that would be the destiny-forging Fox, powering a destination that's become known as the Fox Cities of Wisconsin.

Sure, the cities' birth retells the familiar story of fur traders getting their wares to market via the waterway, but of more lasting impact, this river provided the muscle to turn a settlement into a thriving urban area via the water-powered paper industry (think Kimberly Clark today).

Appleton, a city of 75,000, stands as the geographic, economic and lifestyle hub of the surrounding Fox communities, so that's where I headed and bedded on a long-weekend getaway. (It's a four-plus-hour drive or 45-minute flight from the Twin Cities.) The newly-refurbished Hilton, anchoring the city's main street, served as my base camp as I set out to get to know the town, tracing my steps along sidewalks with poetry engraved in their cement and utility boxes painted in bright mini-murals.

Although the nearby history museum was closed for installations, I marveled at the grand architecture of the Masonic Temple it once was—today, fueled by the spirit of famed magician Houdini, a local son whose story it unfolds. There I stood on Houdini Square, waiting instead for the doors of the Trout Museum of Art to open, where I was greeted by Bart Simpson—well, an engaging exhibit devoted to B(ART), featuring hundreds of stop-motion pics and explanations of the animation process. In other galleries, artist Carey Watters' works provocatively re-examine ancient iconography through feminist eyes. Don't miss the museum's excellent gift shop as you exit.

Raise your hand if you're eager to see more contempo art; then follow me down the main street to the campus of Lawrence College (established even earlier than the city itself) and its Wriston Art Gallery—three intimate spaces housing shows currently honoring Louise Bougeois, who proclaims "Art is a Guarantee of Sanity"; Suzanne Duchamp (sister of artist Marcel) and her portraits of Black women; and a faculty show, diverse and intense in provocative statements (including tongue-in-cheek—I hope—"Make America Uber Again" and "The Donald Is Always Right").

That evening, at the snazzy Performing Arts Center, I caught a show after dinner just steps away at Rye, whose series of small rooms heralds a melange of modern fare, such as my choices: a trio of petite crab cakes marshalled with apple, fennel and celery root in mustard cream and apple cider gastrique, then a roasted-beet risotto fashionably attired with crispy kale, pine nuts, citrus and feta crumbs. Wisconsin's iconic cocktail—an Old Fashioned—hit the spot.

The previous evening, at the clubby, wood-paneled Vince Lombardi's Steakhouse within the Hilton, I ogled memorabilia of the venerated Packers' coach—everything from photos galore to his first Social Security card—as I devoured the Lombardi Caesar salad, followed by the only girl-sized steak on the menu, a tasty Hangar served with fries, chimichurri and truffle aioli.

Main (College) Street is lush with breakfast options, whether it's the white, bright Bakehouse or comfy Copper Rock Coffee, whose antique brick walls and high tin ceiling shelter a vivid cross-section of Appleton, from young moms with tots in tow to hipsters at work on computers to retirees caffeinating their day. A Sunday morning option is brunch at SAP in the (contiguous) town of Grand Chute, where, over a smoked salmon Benedict at the counter, I met, by lucky accident, Doug Johnson, a gay guy (who recently ran for mayor….and lost); he recommended Rascal's Bar as the primo place to meet the boys.

Lunch at Hop Yard Ale Works offered another op to mingle with off-duty locals in their lumberjacks settling in (as I did) for a flight of beer (20 on tap, from a coconut porter and lavender coffee stout to a more mainstream IPA and Irish Red). Pizza, too.

Fat and happy, I headed to Hearthstone, a historic Queen Anne mansion-turned-museum, providing a rivetingly vivid tour led by its director, George Schroeder. "It was the 'home of the future' when it was built by the It Couple of the day—the Obamas of their time: Appleton's movers and shakers," he discloses. "It was the first home. In. The. World. to be lit by hydroelectricity.

The day the lights first went on, 300 townspeople stood on the lawn to watch." From intricate hand-carved wood details to specially-ordered tiles for fireplace surrounds to a bathroom with a flushing toilet and running water (more firsts in town), the papermill owner lived the life of the future.

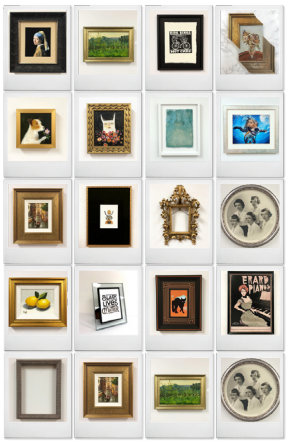
Back on the main drag, shops like Mud & Prints, with its Pride flag displayed, sells pottery and more by regional artists. Blue Moon flaunts Wisconsin-motif-everything, from sweet to sassy: squeezy stress cows to tea towel maps of Wisconsin supper clubs, knit dishcloths to tartan headbands. Wet your whistle at ultra-welcoming McGinnis Irish Bar for a bit of craic, then continue to The Book Store (and the reason my suitcase was decidedly heavier on my return flight).

Neenah, a 20-minute drive to another of the Fox Cities (pop. 28,000), showcases the vintage downtown's photo-ready storefronts, harboring Lyons Books (I'm guilty of a few more purchases); Revival, tempting us with belts and sweaters; Red Door Mercantile, with gifts both straight and sassy, ranging from Smoky the Bear T shirts to pink grapefruit Margarita mix; from a book on Man Skills to board-playing The Epic Beard Game. Pop into (gay-owned) Sante Wine Bar before heading to Neenah's Bergstrom-Mahler Museum aside ice-wreathed Lake Winnebago. (Self-guide maps detail a home tour of The Other Half's mansions of Neenah.)

Within the museum, a gracious home of the 1920s has been converted into a temple of sparkling glass, highlighting Germanic glass from 1500 to 1800; a couple of precious Chihuly pieces saluting modern times; and, foremost, the former homeowner's collection of glass paperweights—4,300 of them, making this the largest cache in the world. Then rev your energy with a delectable bite at Zuppa's, offering chef-driven creations like my superior Cobb salad and way-too-delicious desserts.

Back in Appleton, follow the Fox Trot Trail for two-plus miles' worth of landmarks (it's marked with blue footprints on the sidewalk) and/or hook up to Fox Cities Beer Experience—four brewery visits in five hours, $49. Make plans to return for the city's annual Mile of Music Festival in August, featuring all-indie bands (no covers) performing for free upon a mile-long downtown stretch of 40-plus venues, from bars and parking lots to street corners and even city buses.

But why wait? To plan your own visit, check out www.foxcities.org. ∎



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You Can Take the Girl Out to the Regiment, But...

Photo by Dan Norman

BY E.B. BOATNER

A chill February evening at the Ordway offered a bright and lively production by the Minnesota Opera of Gaetano Donizetti's 1840 *The Daughter of the Regiment*. Opening on a background of lofty Tyrol mountains, a woman thrusts a basket-bound infant inside a cabin and departs. The infant, Marie (Vanessa Becerra), is next seen on these same slopes, an exuberant young adult, found and raised by the entire 21st Regiment, who's become their vivandière–and daughter–under the special tutelage of Sgt. Sulpice (Andrew Wilkowske).

A cheerful tomboy, Marie is in love with a young Tyrolean peasant who's been captured by her regiment. Upon learning Tonio (David Portillo) has saved her life, the soldiers spare his, unanimously agreeing he may marry her–*if* he joins the (French) army.

In the midst of this sun-dappled bliss, Marie's mother (the lady who abandoned that basket), feigning aunthood, not her maternal title, La Marquise de Birkenfeld, arrives to claim her "daughter." Whisked away to the Birkenfeld chateau, Marie is set to a grueling regimen of domestication; song, dance–the works. Marie's soul-weariness and awkward ballet contortions belie the innate strength and grace of her former regimental life. She suffers, yet refuses an arranged marriage.

Resisting an aunt is one thing, but learning the Marquise is her *real* mother, Marie capitulates, agreeing to marry the odious nephew of La Duchess de Krakenthorp (Monét X Change). The Duke's a human Slinky, filleted at birth (the fluid Brandon Siek, also Marie's slithey dance instructor). These talented erformers broaden basic operatic skills to embody their characters' virtues and vices.

Not to worry. Sgt. Sulpice and Tonio arrive to subvert the lessons, and the entire Regiment marches to the rescue. A few arias, a hilarious clinch between Sulpice and La Marquise, the slithering off of the Duke, restoring sun-dappled bliss is.

Ryan Taylor, President and General Director of the MN Opera, noted later, "*The Daughter of the Regiment* is a perfect show for first-time opera-goers. It's lighthearted, has sparkling and lustrous melodies, and is actually quite funny." *Daughter* is unique in its heroine, Marie, Taylor added. "Unlike many pieces of the inherited repertoire, where a central character is beholden to societal or patriarchal pressures and customs, our female lead finds a way to stand up for herself and her trajectory and shape her own story."

La Duchess de Krakenthorp, is a non-singing role previously used to showcase personalities, including actress-comedian Bea Arthur and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Of MN Opera's choice of Monét X Change, Taylor explained, "You're looking for someone with excellent comedic timing and someone who has a strong connection or understanding of opera. A lot of people know Monét X Change for her work on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (double crown winner) but they don't necessarily know about her operatic training and the influence that training had on her skills and ambitions as an artist. We're delighted to showcase all of her talents, including her singing, in this production."

Monét X Change spoke later with *Lavender*:

Q&A with *Lavender* and Monét X Change, production's statuesque Duchess

How does it feel to follow RBG's Duchess? Who wore the better gown?

You know, I once thought that I was going to run for public office, I was going to set my sights on the Supreme Court but I think I'm better than that, so I did not… but I think it's right that RBG and I did the same role, I mean, queen recognize queen, game recognize game! And I have to confess, she had a better gown, I mean come on, RBG did that.

Is the part as enjoyable as it looks?

It is super enjoyable, I mean it's the top of the second act and it's so campy, it's so over the top, and being able to play with Maggie [Margaret Gawrysiak, La Marquise de Birkenfeld], such a funny actress and clearly … a brilliant singer. I love doing the scene with her, and Jeremiah [Sanders] who plays Hortensius, he's great, too. All the Duchess' parts are with really great singers and actors and it's fierce. Honestly, let's take it on tour!

A few words about playing La Duchess in drag?

This is the first production I know of her being in drag. Obviously, drag is our bread and butter, so to come out there and to have that instantly recognizable face of, you know, Monét X Change, Miss Congeniality, winner of All Stars, and to do the little gag at the end and just to be in full drag–it's a full-circle moment for me. Minnesota Opera thank you!

And a few words on drag in general? So many folks enjoy drag today, yet there are those…

Drag, in my opinion, is one of the highest forms of art that one can take on. In many other disciplines you just have to worry about one specific thing, where in drag you have to channel several things to be successful. Especially where I grew up in New York City doing drag, you are the director, the writer, the producer, the host, the comedian, the dancer, the singer; you are wearing all of those hats for the one show that you are producing.

So, that was me, I was all those things seven shows a week in New York City, so it really helped me build and cultivate lots of different aspects of my creativity and my artistry, and I think it's why, honestly, I can step in to so many different worlds, right? You know I've done TV and film stuff, I'm singing opera here, I'm working on an R&B album, I'm doing stand-up and I'm headlining major festivals around the country because of that discipline in my art that drag afforded me, the time to cultivate and create, and that's why I think it is one of the highest forms of art and people can't recognize it. People see drag and they automatically want to denigrate it to something that it's not. I have no time for that.

And, on another note, a lot of this quote-unquote anti-drag legislation is really just anti- trans legislation that we are masking with drag. They're very specific and they're very particular with the language that they're using to ostracize trans persons, and this is a fight that I am willing to have until the day I die, because trans folks deserve the same equality, the same civil rights as every living, breathing person on this planet, period.

What would you say to *Lavender* readers?

I want all of the *Lavender* readers, even if it's not *The Daughter of the Regiment*, if you have any chance to see any opera in any city that you're in, run and do it. I think that for a lot of us, including me when I was a young, spry chicken, you think that opera isn't for you, or it's too high-brow for you. That's not true. *The Daughter of the Regiment*, honestly, is a perfect introduction into opera, it's fun, it's over the top, it's campy, and a lot of opera is like that.

Now, of course there are serious ones, but I think people are [made to think] that opera isn't for them, when it really is. Opera is for everybody to enjoy, not just rich, fancy people in their ballgowns and tuxedos. Baby, when I go to the opera, I go in some Uniqlo stretch pants and a T shirt, you know what I mean? Don't feel like you can't enjoy opera because you don't have a certain outfit or the certain thing that you think is welcome at the opera. Do what you do, go enjoy opera, go out, live, love, laugh! Pose, darling! ▮

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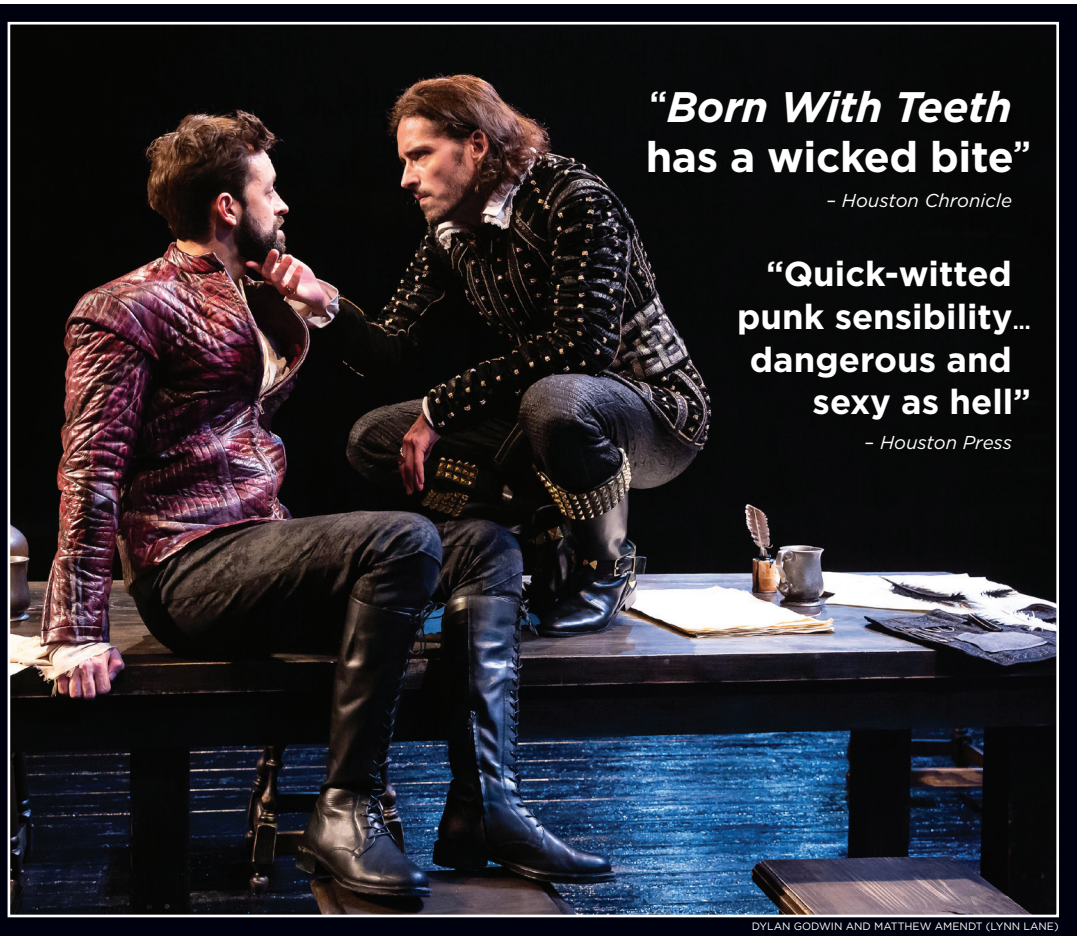

DYLAN GODWIN AND MATTHEW AMENDT (LYNN LANE)

Our Couples

BY LAVENDER

ERIC AND DANA HAGEMANN

How did you both meet?

We met in 2007 through Eric's cousin who was also Dana's high school friend. Acquaintances for several years, we were always aware of what was happening in each other's lives but never really dug deeper. As these things sometimes go, we listened to our hearts (and the universe) and reconnected years later. There was an instant attraction and we soon started dating.

Now the story of our first date? That's a hotly contested debate in our household. Dana believes the night we met for drinks and appetizers was a date. Eric, on the other hand, doesn't see it that way—especially since Dana kept tabs on the Twins game playing over Eric's shoulder the entire time. We still don't know who's right, but we do agree that something special happened that night, and soon we were going on real dates: dinners, movies, getting caught in the rain at an outdoor concert (seriously!)—all the typical stuff.

Dating led to moving in together and eventually getting engaged. We were married on a picture-perfect day in 2017, surrounded by our closest family and friends.

Talk about the highlights of your life journey together.

We feel lucky to have each other to lean on during life's ups and downs—and perhaps nothing has encapsulated that more than our road to fatherhood.

Becoming dads was a dream of ours for as long as we can both remember. Our adoption journey was long and winding, full of highs and lows and tears and even a little bit of heartache. After two potential adoptive matches that didn't work out, followed by nearly a year of silence, our lives changed overnight. This January, we were elevated to dad status—times two! It's a story we still can't quite believe ourselves, but here we are: proud fathers of Lila and Levi, our healthy, beautiful twin babies.

Adoption changed our lives forever. And while sleep has been hard to come by lately, we feel extremely blessed to be on this journey together. Kindness, inclusion, empathy, joy and love are the values that guide us every day—and those that will shape how we raise our children. It's going to be a fun ride, and we're documenting our journey as dads over on Instagram (@mn_dads). Follow along if you'd like!

Photo courtesy of Eric Hagemann

Talk about your present and future as a couple.

We are so excited to settle into our new roles as Lila and Levi's dads. Our goal for the rest of this year is to live with purpose and soak up every moment with our kids. We can't get this time back, so we want to make the most of it!

Aside from rocking parenthood together, we also know the importance of prioritizing our marriage. We've been a couple for a long time—and have been friends even longer—and we value time spent together. Whether it's a downtown Minneapolis staycation, grabbing beers and cheering on the Wild, or cozying up with pizza and reality TV at home, we want to be intentional about growing our relationship as husbands and best friends.

Doing life with your soulmate is pretty special. But sharing this journey with your best friend? That takes it to a whole new level. We feel very blessed to have found each other and cannot wait for all that's in store for us as husbands and dads.

JILL AND DEB PAVLAK

How did you both meet?

We met online through match.com 16 years ago. Our first date was at a craft beer bar. Foreshadowing at its finest wouldn't you say?

Talk about the highlights of your life journey together:

HIGHS: We learned early on in our relationship that we shared an entrepreneurial spirit. We had fun dreaming about opening a business together. We spent 6 years learning about and working in the beer industry which included moving to Davis, California in 2011 so Deb could get her Masters in Brewing at UC Davis.

Photo courtesy of Jill and Deb Pavlak

We were married in 2013 in our home – it was a memorable party thanks to lots of love from family and friends.

We opened Urban Growler in 2014! AGAIN, with a lot of help and support from family, friends, and complete strangers (that are now dear friends.)

In 2017, we adopted a little rescue pup- Frankie- a chiweenie! We love her to pieces!

LOWS: COVID days took a huge toll on our business and our emotional well-being. We lost my mom and both of Deb's parents in the last 2 years. I don't want to spend a lot of time rehashing these days, but I will say, trying to run a hospitality business, at the same time grieving the loss of dear loved ones that were our #1 fans and sources of respite has been very difficult. There's a theme here, family, friends, and community helped us through some very dark days. (We know everyone suffered tremendous losses during this global pandemic so we hesitate to mention our struggles.)

Why do I think we work well together as a couple?

We don't! LOL! And that's ok. Sometimes we argue, but I think that's healthy. All relationships require the ability to compromise and apologize. I'm glad Deb is so good at it!

We are very different from each other. Deb is the oldest in her family and is very practical and independent. She is an engineer and project manager. She's not easily rattled. She lives in the here and now. I'm the youngest of five, a people person, a collaborator; I'm always looking ahead and wanting more… for us, our business, and our community.

Talk about your present and future as a couple?

Presently, we are working a lot, but actively building a strong leadership team of people that value inclusion and Get S*** Done! Urban Growler is our baby, and you don't leave your baby with just anyone. Thankfully, we have a team of warm welcoming folx we trust completely.

Our future as a couple is to keep growing Urban Growler. We want to be one of the top 10 breweries in the state- not necessarily by volume, but by reputation. We are optimistic about our future and grateful for our family, friends, and community. COVID times really drove home the importance and power of community.

CHAZZ AND SHANE RADDATZ

How did you both meet?

In October 2019 we happened to meet only by chance via Facebook Dating. Chazz was out of state with family. Shane who had never logged into a dating app on a whim created a profile. Shane liked Chazz's profile first. Chazz saw it almost right away and taken back by his handlebar mustache. We talked often either by text or phone for a month. It was like we always knew each other; it was easy. In an instance we both knew we had made a powerful connection. It was love at first, um type. We knew even before we met, we had met our forever partner. Our first date was November 1st and we really have not been apart from each other since.

Talk about the highlights of your life journey together.

We are usually out exploring, always matching everything we wear down to the underwear, and often something Chazz created. We shine now in this world and people notice our happiness. We get stopped often by many people who love our outfits. On our free time we are renovating our 100-year-old home in St. Paul ourselves one room

Photo by Christopher Smith. Captured by Chris www.capturedbychris.org

at a time. We love any holiday and decorate our home especially Halloween and Christmas. We had 15 Christmas trees one year and will grow even bigger in 2023. In the summer we enjoy our three tier waterfall pond and multiple gardens. Through the year we attend many craft shows selling Shane's custom stained glass, teaching art classes at Smith and Trade Mercantile in Stillwater. Chazz is always creating something with the sewing machine, rhinestones and chainmail. Shane asked Chazz to marry him December 20th, 2019, in Duluth at Bentleyville. We were married January 12, 2023. It was just us. We wanted to share this experience with each other and focus only on each other. We got married on the bridge in front of Hogwarts Castle at Universal Islands of Adventure, Orlando. It was perfect, beautiful and magical. Now, we are more than best friends, lovers, we are husbands!

Talk about your present and future as a couple.

For the first time in our lives, we went from surviving to thriving. Life is not easy, but it's easier just going through it together. As we are both Pisces and it is amazing as we often know what the other is thinking without words, we have an unspoken connection. We bring balance to one another. Disagreements, we find we are often saying the same thing and on the same side just using different words. In the future we look forward to traveling together with dreams of future Disney trips and a European vacation. We are excited to open our home to new friends. It is our goal to inspire others. We can learn from each other and create change in ourselves and eventually the world. We look forward to continuing working with the NOH8 campaign whose mission is to promote marriage, gender and human equality through education, advocacy, social media, and visual protest. It is important to for us in our own lives to bring awareness and promote diversity and inclusion. I was asked, "what happens now that this adventure is over." This adventure is far from over, we have only finished a chapter. Turn the page and there will be something else exciting. We share our adventure as 2Dudes1Dream on Instagram and Facebook. You can follow us on our socials and even watch our wedding video https://linktr.ee/2dudes1dream.

Photo by Jared L. Fessler

MARILOU AND JANINE

How did you both meet?

We met back in college of 2008. We were both taking the same course in the Philippines and were in the same circle of friends. Eventually, we became the best of friends. Until it became more than that. But we didn't really know how to navigate the world if we were to become a couple so we started dating other guys. You know as best friends, we didn't want to risk having to break up and then become strangers. Until we just couldn't help seeing and keep on missing each other. So after 10 years of reassessing, in 2018, we decided to finally become official.

Talk about the highlights of your life journey together.

In 2019, I (Marilou) was presented the opportunity to work and live in Minnesota. That meant having to leave Janine and my family behind. But with the thought of having a chance to start our own family in a place where same sex couples can get married, I decided to take the opportunity. So before flying to the US, I planned a weekend getaway as a going away party. Never did Janine know that there was actually a marriage proposal that I planned together with our closest friends to surprise Janine. It was a very romantic and memorable proposal. And so after the proposal, we embarked on this long distance relationship that was not only challenged by distance and time zones, but also by the pandemic. Luckily, after months of the crazy lockdowns (which seemed like forever, btw), Janine followed me in Minnesota and we got to plan our micro wedding arranged by The Little Wedding Co. It was a very intimate and lovely wedding that we will forever cherish. Just last year, we came home to the Philippines to celebrate the holidays with our families as a married couple. We also used this chance to have another wedding celebration that our families and friends got to witness. It was supposed to be our dream boho beach wedding but we were blessed with rainfall and partied indoors instead. It was fun and many core memories were created.

Talk about your present and future as a couple.

Right now, we are at a stage of enjoying traveling with our fur baby Milo. Currently saving for our home and exploring places we want to settle in. Eventually, we want to live somewhere near the beach, have babies, and another dog.

DANIEL AND ALICIA

How did you both meet?

Alicia & I met on the TikTok app. Alicia was scrolling through the app and saw me and duetted my video. When I received this duet I duetted her back, and then we started duetting each other's videos a lot. I then messaged her, and we started chatting a little bit and starting facetiming on snapchat every day, and that led to talking on the phone from the time we woke up to the time we went to bed. We were best friends. We would even call each other in the middle of the night if we couldn't sleep. Alicia had no idea I was transgender when she duetted me, but when she got to know me more, we talked about a lot more. The best thing about this is she would look up videos and follow other creators on TikTok just to learn about what it's like to be trans. At this point, she and another friend were planning to come to New York to meet me in person. When Alicia got to New York and got out of the car I instantly fell in love. She was beautiful and she had this sparkle in her eye and I just couldn't keep my eyes off of her. We hung out for about 4 days, and we could not get enough of each other. The day Alicia left New York I was heartbroken; we both were. All we wanted was each other. Once Alicia got back to Minnesota, we talked about me coming to visit her, I was terrified because I had never been on a plane before and I was going to be doing it alone with no friend was coming with me. Alicia and I got a $80 plane ticket and I got myself on that plane and got to Minnesota. I was only supposed to be here for 5 days, doing an interview and finding jobs. But then I knew I couldn't go back to New York and be without her. I asked her around early December if she would take a trip to New York with me in her car. She was 100% on board with anything I wanted to do. We got in that car and traveled to New York and back to Minnesota in a weekend. We barely slept and barely ate; we packed my entire life in her car and I moved here. Started my life completely over. I knew then that no matter what we would make it. I mean we dealt with each other for 48 hours in a car with no sleep!

Talk about the highlights of your life journey together

I have never traveled until meeting Alicia, she started taking me all over the place, We went to South Dakota, Iowa, Missouri, and Montana. She loves to travel as do I, I just never really had the courage to do so. But with her I feel like I can do anything, We have date nights out at least once a week just to make sure we keep this candle burning. We went to a drag show one night and she had never been to one, but we walked through that door and sat down to watch the show and never got up for hours. She loved every minute of it, she was amazed by it! She wanted to continue going when they had the shows. She was never introduced to my world until now and she loved it. Our biggest highlight is right after we got back from our honeymoon, we wanted to try for a baby, and with being trans this is something that is really hard. I knew I couldn't give her a baby, I felt like I was going to let her down, but we found a clinic that could help us and now we are expecting a beautiful baby girl.

Photo by Tiffany J. Lor

Talk about your present and future as a couple

For our future plans, we plan on buying a new house that has a beautiful big backyard for our 3 children and 3 dogs. Alicia owns a boutique called Tangled Up In teal, she wants her business to grow and expand. I will continue to run my board & train facility and just make sure my family is well taken care of.

I'm always proud to say how Alicia loved me through my entire transition, when I met her, I just came out as being trans and she loved me for me no matter what, she didn't care that I used to be a woman. She was my best friend and loved me. Transitioning is not easy. My body and mind changes every day, and the fact that she can stand by me through the ups and the downs of this transition has been amazing.

We reached out to so many different people about marrying us, we didn't care about getting married in a church, we just wanted a wedding that would fit us. We reached out to many different people, they would talk to me about everything and then as soon as I mentioned I was transgender, they wouldn't want to talk to me anymore. We had this one person we were talking with and thought about going with them but then they started asking me way too many personal questions and it just got weird, and they started acting weird with me, so I just stopped. It was a breath of fresh air when we met The Little Wedding Co., we felt welcomed and not judged at all. They gave us the best wedding and it was a night we will never forget. ∎

Alight in the Dark

The Story Of Love Beyond All Barriers

BY SUSAN SWAVELY

As many Americans are aware, a terrible war continues to trudge on in Ukraine, after Russia invaded the country on February 24th, 2022. Ukrainians have proven to be iron-tough and extremely resilient, and are continuing to fight to liberate their country from Russian oppression. Many brave Ukrainians have been displaced because of the war, and are seeking refuge.

Photo courtesy of BigStock/Angelov

In the United States, the organization Alight, which works to help people in all types of international crises, has worked to meet the needs of all refugees, and set them up for success in their new homes. Karla Hult, a reporter for KARE 11, is currently also helping support Alight with media outreach related to the sponsorship of Ukrainian refugees by Minnesotans. Hult says "Since those earliest days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Minnesota-based Alight has been on the ground in the region responding to the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe since World War II: providing medicine, hundreds of tons of food, blankets and warm clothes, and 73,416 safe, secure nights of temporary shelter."

She goes on to add that "Alight searches for and then supports amazing sponsor groups right here in Minnesota—people willing to step up to welcome Ukrainian families to the U.S.… The work of a sponsor is both beautiful and important: from greeting newcomers at the airport, to helping them find housing and jobs, to helping them register children for school, to ensuring the families can navigate public transportation and grocery stores."

On November 19th, 2022, after a "long period of online communication" according to Hult, Borysko Filas and Andriy Denis (whose names have been changed for their safety and comfort), arrived in the United States, welcomed by their Minnesotan sponsor, who wishes to remain completely anonymous. Filas and Denis have a beautiful love story, and although it is tested by the oppression they face—both from the war and for being a gay couple—there are so many loving things they had to say about each other.

Filas and Denis' relationship began through a dating app. Denis says, "My relationship with Borysko started quite unexpectedly, once I read a message in a gay dating app, replied (even though I rarely answered anyone) and we started talking." Filas adds, "We talked about everything; I couldn't believe that I was talking to a person who knew my true desires and feelings. It was a very pleasant and unusual feeling. After one week of communication, we agreed to meet in a café. When I was going to this meeting, I had a feeling that it was a dream and it was not possible, but it was reality."

Before this, Filas says he had been living his life "outwardly heterosexual 100%." From there, their relationship blossomed into an extremely deep connection: "quite often it even happened that Borysko drove me to work and then picked me up, because we wanted to spend more time together, then after six months we started living together" (Denis). Both men had incredible things to say about their partner. Filas says about Denis, "The thing I love most about him is his kindness to everyone… Whenever a mosquito or a fly flies into our apartment, he tries to catch it and let it out… He always supports me, even when he knows I'm wrong," and he adds with a smile, "and he is also very handsome." Denis comments on his partner's "perseverance and organization" and says, "In general, we are just comfortable being together and it is impossible to describe in words why."

Although anyone could tell from their responses that Denis and Filas are a beautiful match, they are not out to many of their friends or family. Filas explains, "I have no desire to tell my family or friends about it yet, as I am 100% sure that they are not ready to accept it. Unfortunately, in Ukraine, non-traditional orientation is considered something abnormal, and many people will judge you and not communicate with you at all." Denis adds on to this, "in Ukraine, I was a closed gay man and told few people about my personal life. Of course, many of my close people know, mostly my relatives of my generation (my sisters and brothers) and my close friends. I didn't tell my older relatives because I'm afraid they won't be able to accept it."

The attitude towards LGBTQ people in the Ukraine is very negative. Even though homosexuality itself is not explicitly illegal, same-sex marriage is illegal, conversion therapy is not banned, and same-sex couples cannot legally adopt a child. However, Denis notes that, "In Ukraine, there are quite a few queer people, especially communities. There were even pride parades in Kyiv a few years before the war, but tolerance and attitudes of society should be better, and I hope that it will be in time."

Filas and Denis realized they needed to flee Ukraine because of the war, even though the decision was extremely difficult, especially for Denis, who says, "Borysko persuaded me to leave Ukraine. At first it was very difficult for me to decide; I didn't want to leave my beloved Kyiv, I didn't want to give up my favorite business, which I spent a lot of effort on developing."

Things continued to get worse, however, and Denis explained, "In the fall, the situation in Kyiv began to deteriorate due to frequent Russian missile attacks, because they have a single goal—the destruction of Ukrainians" and after coming to the devastating realization that," lamented Denis, "maybe tomorrow a missile will hit your house and you will die", the couple began looking for sponsorship to come to the United States.

Because of the tremendous number of displaced families looking for refuge, many services for refugees were completely full, and registration was

closed. This did not stop Filas, however, who used every outlet he could think of, and never got discouraged, even after sending "more than 200 messages" seeking help. Just when everything might have started to seem hopeless, Filas says, "A few weeks later, without expecting it, I received an email from the administrator of the welcome.us website, who told me that he had been approached by the LGBTQ community in San Francisco with a request to help us find a sponsor. And then this administrator put us in touch with our sponsor."

After arriving in the United States in November, Filas and Denis began settling into their new lives in Minnesota. They both noted that things in the United States were very different from the lives they were used to in Ukraine—positive and negative things—and things that were, as Denis explains it's, "just different and I can't even understand what the difference is." Both men recognized the beauty of Minnesota and the open-hearted kindness of Minnesotans.

Denis says, "Sometimes Minneapolis reminds me of Kyiv. I really like the people of Minnesota, the first people I met in Minnesota were our sponsors and they turned out to be very kind, sincere, open and good people" and he adds, "I really want to see Minnesota in the summer, it seems to me that the nature is very beautiful here, you know, when you look at this beauty and you get goosebumps." Filas agrees, stating one of the nicest things about coming here: "Minnesotans, the kindness and sincerity of people is amazing. It happens that people you don't know help you as if you were their child or their relative. They don't need any reward, they just help you, and it's really impressive."

Filas and Denis' incredible story of love and bravery should serve as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, and the work of Alight should show us that there is so much goodness left in a world, even when it can sometimes feel overwhelmingly bad. Denis says, "Alight is an incredible organization; their work and help is invaluable. Sometimes I didn't believe it was possible, that someone could rent us a place to live, and it wouldn't cost us anything, that someone could help you do something for free… it's amazing… and Alight does it… it is very important for Ukrainians who go to the United States, and I am very grateful for the help with housing."

Denis leaves the interview with wisdom we can all appreciate: "Perhaps my advice will apply to all couples, not just queer ones. Love each other, enjoy each other, trust each other."

If you would like to help out families like Filas and Denis, Hult wants you to know: "Alight welcomes everyone interested in partnering with us at this important moment: whether that's making a donation or welcoming a Ukrainian family." It is not hopeless; you can help.

For more information on how you can help, log on to WeAreAlight.org. ∎

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The Lavish Lab Experience

BY ANALISE PRUNI

According to its creators, Lavish Lab may be a "new baby" in décor, design and event planning, but really it is the fruition of more than 20 years' experience. The studio is located in Northeast Minneapolis and run by Scott Beck and Marshall Kudi Ngwa, who you might also know as the winner of *Ru Paul's Drag Show* season one, superstar BeBe Zahara Benet.

Kudi Ngwa, considers Minneapolis his second home. When he returned here after performing and working New York, he noticed there was something missing in terms of "extravagancy" in event planning. That's where Lavish comes in. "What do they get to touch, what do they get to feel, what's the fantasy?" says Kudi Ngwa, as he delves into the details of curating someone's dream event. "More is more," he adds with emphasis. "Making you feel like you're transported into a different kind of world, whatever that is, and really bringing your imagination to life as close as we can get that to be."

Beck and Kudi Ngwa,'s worlds collided in the early 2000s when an emerging Minneapolis drag circuit queen BeBefound out that Beck was a professional ballroom dancer and enlisted him to help choreograph part of a performance. They've been best friends and frankly, like family, ever since. Their careers have taken them all over the United States and around the world; more than 20 years later they're ready to be reintroduced to Minneapolis in a big way.

They had planned to launch the brick-and-mortar space of Lavish Lab in 2019 before COVID-19 effectively deflated all ideas of extravagant gatherings. However, they considered the time in-between one for creativity and growth. They built and curated *their* ideal space in the meantime. It would be impossible to easily summarize the scope of their combined experience but Kudi Ngwa's background in fashion and design, meld with Scott's theater, dance and design skills to craft a beautifully lavish partnership.

Kudi Ngwa says that curating an amazing event begins with making clients feel comfortable. "Let's have a glass of wine and let's just talk. I think if you really want to help someone, you really want to know them, then what are the things that they love?" As I begin to melt into a furry, snow-white couch with Kudi Ngwa and Scott sitting adjacent on either side of me, my "interview" has devolved into a casual chat, my notebook questions ignored. Although there's no wine and I'm not a client, this must be exactly the way they put people at ease.

Beck adds that there are job titles at Lavish, but depending on the project, either of them can take the reins. "Sometimes, Marshall will be what we'll call the 'head' person and have the overall vision and everyone else rallies around that person to create that fantasy," he says. Or, if Beck has an idea everyone may rally around him in the same way. That can involve anything from vision boards, meetings and phone calls, or using their studio to showcase their painstakingly crafted themes and décor. In various rooms around the space there are bouquets of flowers showcasing dozens of spectrums of color: a lounge space lit in lilac low lights and royal purple pillows arranged on a purple couch behind a fluffy, cotton-candy pink throw rug.

After they chat with clients, they begin to craft a very individualized experience. "You learn things that they maybe never would've shared before like 'you like mermaids and like the color turquoise because of that," Beck says. Uncovering someone's unique individualities is one of their favorite parts of the job. "We want you to feel like you have an event that you designed; it's like you walk into a room and say 'this is more than I could've ever imagined."

Kudi Ngwa insists that no one must leave Minnesota to bring their dream event to life. "I think that's what we're trying to do with Lavish is take all of our experiences of being well traveled, to bring those here and say we can fill that void." While Kudi Ngwa is still currently performing as BeBe (he has been very, very busy), recently he has been more engrossed in creating the Lavish Lab experience.

"Marshall will tell you that BeBe is a part of who he is, it's not necessarily two separate people," Beck says. "When we're doing Lavish stuff you're getting a bit of BeBe, when he's performing, you're getting a little bit of Lavish. For him creativity is creativity and it lives inside of him." Their friendship is part of what makes Lavish Lab magical and their designs so compelling.

One project they were particularly proud of was designing a holiday window display

Continued on page 21

Photos by Randy Stern

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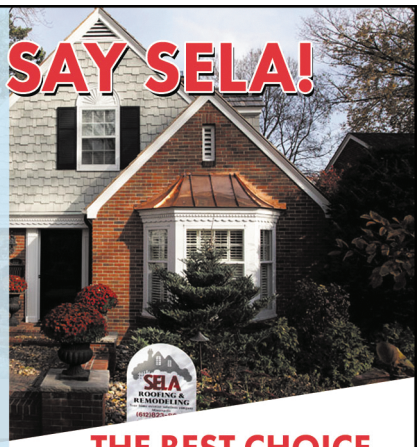

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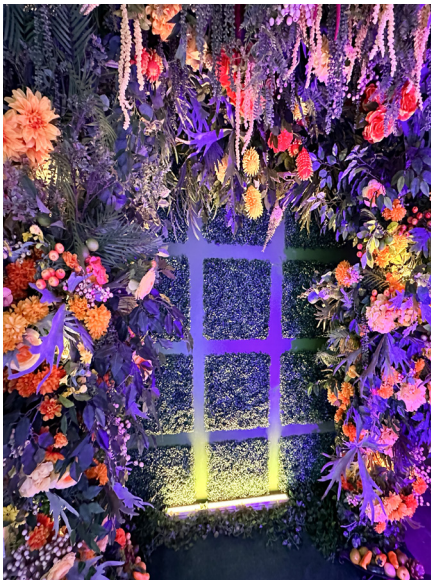
for a BIPOC pop up shop in downtown Minneapolis. They absolutely loved the experience, but wish that there were more opportunities to do so. "For me personally, there are not a lot of People of Color in this space in Minneapolis and I think that just being able to bring a little bit of that diversity here in the city and creating a different kind of energy is very important," Kudi Ngwa says. "How can I contribute my gift into the space that I'm living in?"

Beck, touches on the "biracial-ness" of their company. "Marshall being from Cameroon and being able to represent other cultures, it affords us and Marshall to go into a [different] space." He adds that BIPOC creatives are not taking up nearly enough space in these artistic domains. "So for him to be a voice for those people and those cultures brings a whole new perspective to this game. That is also something that this company represents."



Beck and Kudi Ngwa have begun to carve out their own space here where everyone's ideas are welcome, and dreams can become realities. "I always say I am who I am because of the village behind me and having someone like Scott, and Diego (their marketing manager who works from Arizona), is something that I don't take lightly," Marshall adds. "We love Minnesota and we love the fact that we can bring that kind of energy. I would just encourage our leaders and our people to take chances: to be able to not only live out loud but be able to dream." ▮

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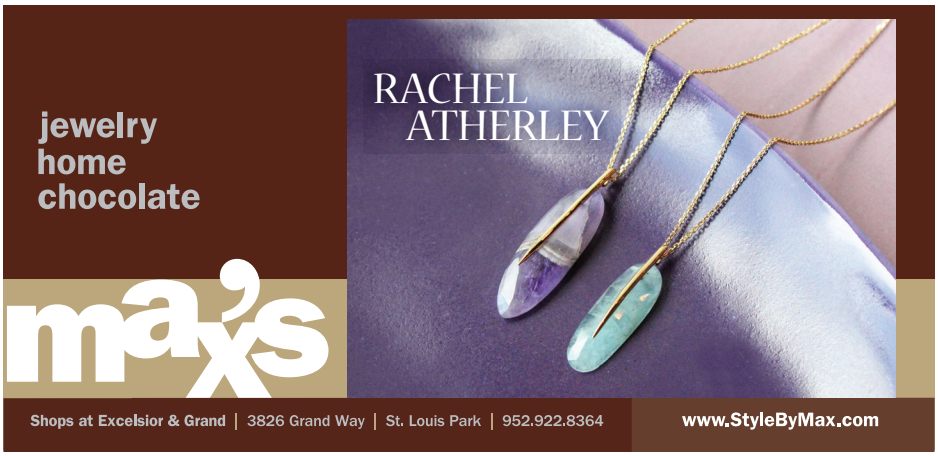

A (Re)introduction

BY KARRI PLOWMAN

Greetings. Hello.

The hardest part in starting this column has been how to address you, the reader. Often, I'm on stage emceeing and the greetings just seem to flow naturally. However, I've been kindly offered the opportunity to lend a new voice to this column and fill some big shoes in both the leather community and the Twin Cities LGBT community. Continuing the tradition of this column for *Lavender Magazine* and Steve Lenius is a scary task that I don't take lightly. Steve wrote this column for almost 30 years, giving us insight into leather, updates on events, and explaining things we wanted to know about before we could just click a mouse and find out online. Thank you, Steve.

So who am I? Many know me in the leather community and the larger Twin Cities area as the creative force behind Twin Cities Leather and Latte, that closed prior to Covid. Others know me from involvement with other various clubs and organizations. And some just see me once a year on the Saloon stage giving a speech dressed in leather pants.

Who I really am is a little more complicated. And, I think, illustrates why I can continue this column while bringing a different perspective to you. First and foremost, I am a person of color—specifically a Paiute from California. I came to Minnesota in 1993 to attend the University of Minnesota with an American Indian scholarship opportunity. I received a History and American Indian Studies degree before continuing on with graduate work in Anthropology. I joined the work force in the American Indian community working for a non-profit and then worked in various advocacy and lobby roles before losing everything during the small recession and housing crash.

In that time, I was married, had children, divorced, and came out of the closet. I've sat at tables with people while being the only person of color in the room and often the only queer person as well. I've marched before marching felt like a thing, I've testified in front of various city and state governments, and I've written from a community perspective for other publications. The one consistent thread since coming out was my love of leather. In fact, I often state, leather saved me and I owe it a debt.

My philosophy in the leather community has always been I want all people to be happy. I don't care what you are into as long as it doesn't hurt someone or violate their consent. You deserve to be happy. And saying leather community is also somewhat of a short cut. In person I often say communities. Because that is what leather-capital L is, just a collective of various communities including rubber, puppies, bdsm, etc. attempting to find their happiness. Wrapped around this is terms of gender, sexual orientation, and sexual positioning. So many words and activities the whole thing can become quite confusing.

That's my goal in this column to unravel some of the confusion. To speak to both the current participants of leather and the curious. Honestly, I'm not sure if I was brand new, wanting to join in the leather community, I could do it. All of this does seem quite daunting at first from the outside. But I hope to untangle and explain it to you. In the future, I want to elevate unheard voices from these communities as examples and guides to things you may be interested in knowing about around the Twin Cities. Because I do believe leather is one path towards happiness. And, we live in a city of such diversity.

I'll leave you with a recent experience for the new and old participants of leather. Recently a young man of color approached me about going out to a leather event. He wanted so badly to fit in; he'd seen things online that made him believe this could be a place for him. He was so afraid of what his friends might say, but was willing to overcome that fear based on the potential reward. I helped him with a simple item of gear, answered his questions, and said I'd be a recognizable face in the crowd. Above all, I told him be yourself because you are valid in the queer leather space that is created for you. So, to the experienced leather community member, I say…. remember how scared we were in the beginning and offer a hand up. To the new potential member…take a chance. I'm living proof that there is a wonderful group of people waiting to meet you and make your life better. ▮

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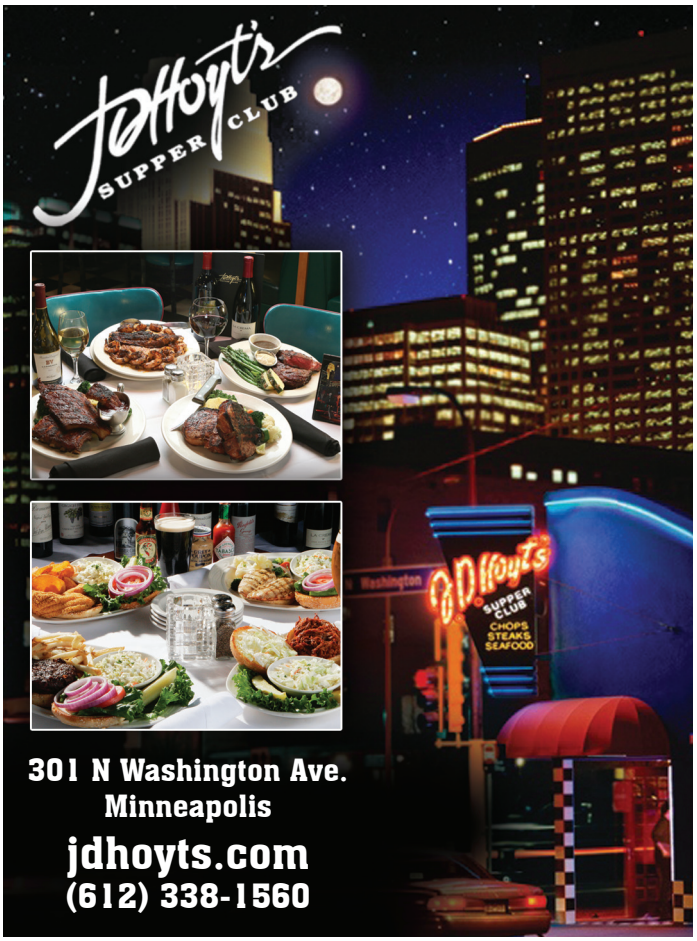
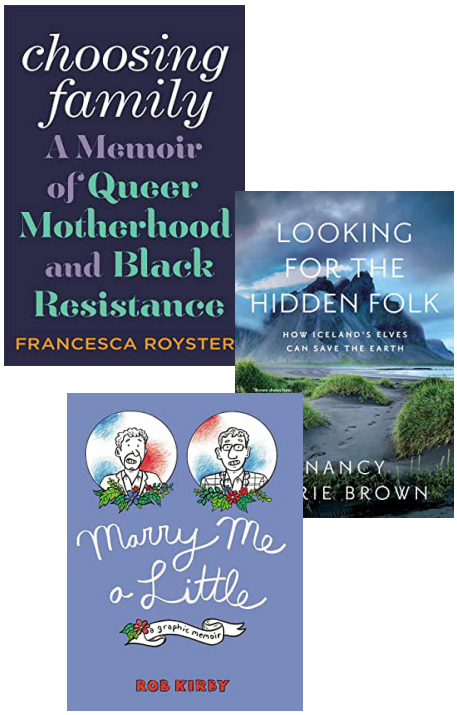


Books

BY E.B BOATNER



Choosing Family: A Memoir of Queer Motherhood and Black Resistance

Race is at the center of this memoir and of Royster's world–how could it not be? In a multiracial Chicago, every decision, every action is seen through a lens of skin color and heritage. Royster, who is Black and her partner, Annie, white, have gone to great lengths to adopt a Black infant; in their 40s and 50s, there weren't many options, but they fell in love with Cecelia immediately, then waited out the birth mother's decision about this Black, queer, feminist home in which her child would be raised. Royster's family matriarchs had built Chicago's South Side, where "family" was fluid, often overriding "marriage" or other accepted boundaries. They focus on Joy, whether or not others offer or allow it to be claimed.

Looking for the Hidden Folk: How Iceland's Elves Can Save the Earth

"Why should disbelief be our default?" asks Brown, while also asking readers to consider what exactly they mean by "believe." Even today, Icelandic road construction and other extensive, public endeavors have been halted or rerouted to avoid destroying Elves' ancient homes or because of other human activities inflicted on the Earth. Brown first visited Iceland in 1986, fell in love with its magical terrain, returning some 30 times. Perhaps half to two-thirds of Icelandic adults acknowledge the *huldufólk*, visible only to one another and humans known as elf-seers, while ethnographers have plotted ancient tales onto a topographical Icelandic map, discovering elves "come across as embodiments of the landscape itself." Brown argues that an elf-curious attitude is not "silly": "It's the physics of the 21st century."

Marry Me a Little: A Graphic Memoir

A personal and historical look at gay married life by comics creator Rob Kirby, who, following a decade together, and legalization of same-sex marriage in Minnesota, hied off with partner John to the "very romantic" Hennepin Courthouse and solemnized the deed. Solemn, yes, but Kirby's a gay cartoonist, eager to guide the as-yet-unlinked through paths of pomp and circumstance and middle-class hymenologically correct procedures: rainbow moods and vacillations, mid-couture, idiosyncratic wedding regalia ("business casual with a touch of retro flair"), then into meandering side excursions back into history leading to the final, count-down years to 2013. Remember CA's Prop 8? Follow Kirby's dark meanderings through the Trump … well, *there*, as well as loving remembrances of their cherished dog. A book to read; to gift. ∎

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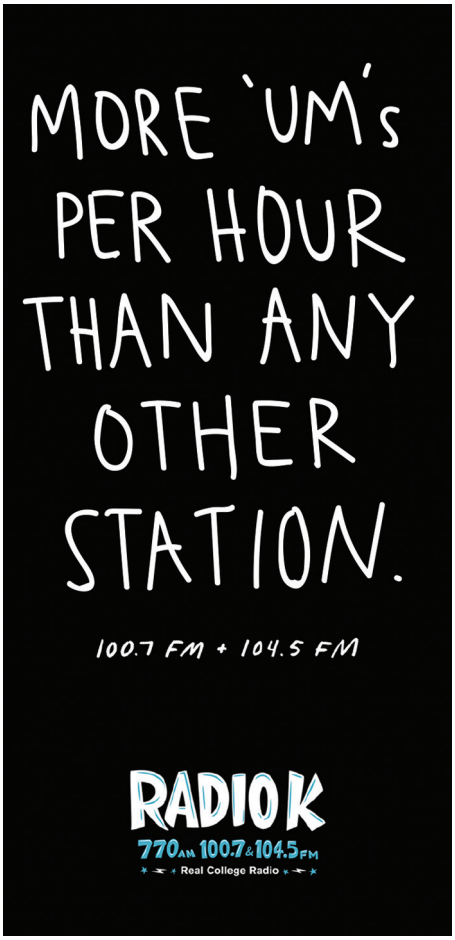
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Equity for LGBTQ Entrepreneurs of Color Enters its Third Year

BY GABRIELLE REEDER

Two humanitarian organizations, Quorum and PFund, partnered together to spearhead an initiative. The Equity Fund for Queer Entrepreneurs of Color gives back and invests in small businesses within the BIPOC and LGBTQ community.

Lavender Magazine spoke to Aaron Zimmerman, the executive director of PFund, the only LGBTQ community foundation serving the Upper Midwest, and Rebecca Waggoner, the executive director of Quorum, Minnesota's LGBTQ+ and Allied Chamber of Commerce.

"We're really excited to be partnering with Quorum on this particular endeavor. Our relationship actually starts way prior to that. PFUND does scholarships for LGBTQ students across the midwest and Quorum actually hosts three scholarships with PFUND," Zimmerman shared.

The equity cohort began after the initial onslaught of the COVID-19 lockdown and the murder of George Floyd. "At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic," Zimmerman explained, "we started a COVID rapid response fund, which was [for] organizations, and families, deeply impacted by covid-19 within the LGBT community. But, as that started to unravel, the murder of George Floyd and the uprising that occurred after that really had a deep and profound impact on our communities as well."

Given PFund and Quorums' decade-long history, the two teams met to discuss how they could help these affected communities. With PFund's devotion to giving back to the community, and Quorum's dedication to connecting, building, and strengthening, the two foundations created a cohort that asks for patience, hope, and commitment.

The solution resolved to a two-part program. Waggoner said the equity fund provides support for small businesses. She mentioned a lot of complaints and concerns that arose during the COVID-19 Pandemic were that these small business owners had no one to reach out to for help or backup. With the equity fund, business owners have immense support for every aspect of their business. Whether that means assistance with staffing, growth, or event planning.

According to Zimmerman, The Equity Fund for Queer Entrepreneurs intends to support businesses that experienced either physical or monetary damage due to the uprising, COVID-19, or a combination of the two.

Photos provided by Aaron Zimmerman/PFund

PFund funds the initiative, while Quorum provides the businesses with resources to take their small business to the next level. During the first year of the Equity Fund, businesses used the grant money ($90,000 split between 15 businesses) to stay open and pay their staff. Now with society's progression to a new normal, Waggoner said the grantees stepped up with research into technology investments, infrastructure investments, and staffing growth. The grant money increased from $75,000 to $105,000, and Waggoner and Zimmerman hope to continue the growth.

"Our goal is to move the economic needle in Minnesota for LGBTQ+ businesses and allied businesses, and this is exactly how we do it. We take a chance, and we take a dream, and we turn it into an actual reality. We know that this program is helping change people's business lives," Waggoner said.

PFund granted $5,000 to 15 individual businesses active within the BIPOC and/or queer community. The second half of the cohort includes spreading business education and professional development available to the business owners, with Quorum's assistance.

Some of last year's grant recipients include: The Melanated Remedy, Lexicon Consulting, Doula4All, Vibrant Life Therapy, LLC, and Skin That Really Matters.

"It's the only one of its kind in the country where the local or the regional LGBTQ+ foundation is partnering with the chamber to provide these kinds of services, provide this access," said Waggoner. "During the pandemic and after the murder of George Floyd, there was a huge economic hit for Quorum members, specifically for members of color." Waggoner further explained that the pandemic led to a swath of individuals turning their side hustle to their main hustle due to the recession.

"There was economic turmoil across the board," said Waggoner. "We know that some of the businesses fail because there's a history of lack of funding and access to capital for small, marginalized businesses, especially businesses of color. And then, when you add in LGBT+ identities, then you move even farther away

from the center. So that was part of the impetus: what do we do? What can we do?"

Once Quorum and PFund settled on a business proposal, the two organizations reached out to the respective communities for feedback. Zimmerman said Quorum and PFund reached out to the local BIPOC and queer communities to develop a grant application.

"At every level, we wanted to have the community's voice, lived experience, and expertise at the table," Zimmerman stated.

Not only do community members decide which questions to include in the application, they also serve on the committee to select the winners. Resorting to community input allows the applications to dig deeper. For example, instead of only asking rudimentary questions about grant money's impact on a business, the community implored how the business invests in the BIPOC and/or queer community and how they plan to help the BIPOC and/or queer communities.

Each applicant receives a grade based on a scoring rubric. The highest-scoring business receives an additional $15,000 extra, totaling $20,000, the second-highest scorer receives $10,000 of additional funds, totaling $15,000, and the third-highest scorer receives an additional $5,000, totaling $10,000.

Last year, Belo Miguel Cipriani received the $20,000 grant. Cipriani is the founder of Oleb Media, an inclusive consulting firm that focuses on accessibility testing within digital media.

The goal is to increase funding every year. Grant applications open in the fall and the cohort committee meet over a six-month period to review applications and select grantees.

"I know that coming out of the pandemic now," Waggoner said, "or getting to the next phase of new normal, people are hungry for this business education. And they're hungry for this grant money. I mean, it's not ever going to be enough to pay for everything that you need for your business, but what it is an investment, and think that's what makes it a little different. We're investing in a business, and it lets people know that they matter, that their business, while small, is small but mighty, and it can grow." ∎

Queer & Trans* Ecologies Symposium: Twin Cities Campus Edition

BY JEN PEEPLES

What is a Queer & Trans* Ecologies Symposium?

The Queer & Trans* Ecologies Symposium is a groundbreaking event that seeks to explore new perspectives and create awareness of issues affecting queer and trans* communities in relation to ecology. This symposium brings together a diverse group of scholars, activists, artists, and community members to engage in discussions, workshops, poetry readings, and art exhibitions.

At its core, the Queer & Trans* Ecologies Symposium is an interdisciplinary initiative that seeks to examine the dynamic relationships between gender, sexuality, disability, race, colonialism, and the environment. The symposium is a platform for scholars and activists to showcase their research, share ideas, and engage in critical conversations about the intersections of queer and trans* issues with ecological concerns.

Participants can expect to engage in a range of activities during the three-day event, including workshops on topics such as queer ecology, fermentation, and intersexual and transnational approaches to the environment. The symposium also includes poetry readings, an art exhibit, and panels featuring experts in the fields of queer and trans* studies, environmental studies, and social justice.

Ultimately, the Queer & Trans* Ecologies Symposium seeks to bring attention to the unique ways in which queer and trans* communities experience environmental issues and to develop strategies for building more inclusive and equitable approaches to environmental activism.

Luckily for Minnesota Residents, The University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus is gearing up for an extraordinary event that promises to celebrate diversity and inclusivity like never before. The Queer & Trans* Ecologies Symposium, scheduled from March 23rd to March 25th, 2023, to be just as unique as an initiative that seeks to explore queer and trans* ecologies in the Anthropocene, covering a range of topics in the fields of arts, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

The symposium is the culmination of the Interdisciplinary Collaborative Workshop on Queer & Trans* Ecologies that began in 2020, inviting everyone to participate in a series of workshops, poetry readings, an art exhibit, panels, and discussions. The symposium's events will be free and available to the public, providing an excellent opportunity for all to learn and engage with the community in a dynamic and interactive environment.

Photo courtesy of BigStock/ kasto

At the symposium's heart is the Queer and Trans* Ecologies Interdisciplinary Initiative, a groundbreaking approach that explores the impact of gender, sexuality, disability, race, and colonialism on the environment. Attendees can expect to delve deeper into these topics, with a particular focus on intersexual and transnational approaches to the environment. This initiative aims to explore questions in the fields of queer and trans* ecologies, including new embodiments and social relations in the Anthropocene.

The Queer & Trans* Ecologies Symposium boasts an impressive lineup of events, including an art exhibit and opening party at the Quarter Gallery. Visitors can indulge in the thought-provoking Queer Ecology Hanky Project exhibit, featuring a collection of handkerchiefs made by queer and trans folks that explore different ecological themes. There's also a conversation with Mel Y. Chen and Michelle Murphy at IAS Thursdays at the Best Buy Theater in Northrop, where attendees can join in discussions and explore queer and trans* ecologies further.

The symposium is also excited to host a fermentation workshop by Sandor Katz, an award-winning author and food activist. Attendees can learn about fermentation and how it connects to the natural world and explore new ways of interacting with the environment. Writer Eli Clare is set to grace the Bell Museum with their presence, offering a reading that explores issues related to queerness and disability in the environment. There will also be a range of workshops and panels hosted at the Liberal Arts Engagement Hub, providing further opportunities for visitors to engage and learn.

The Queer & Trans* Ecologies Symposium is a truly unique opportunity for attendees to engage with the community and explore queer and trans* ecologies in a dynamic and interactive environment. The symposium offers an incredible platform for visitors to learn about the importance of diversity and inclusivity in the Anthropocene and how it connects to the world around us.

The symposium's official website at www.Queerandtransecologies.com offers more information about the speakers, resources, and schedule. Visitors are encouraged to visit the website for any additional information they might require and for any questions or concerns.

Don't miss out on this opportunity to participate in an event that celebrates diversity and inclusivity like never before. The Queer & Trans* Ecologies Symposium promises to be an unforgettable experience that offers a unique opportunity to engage with the community and explore queer and trans* ecologies in the Anthropocene. Join us from March 23rd to March 25th, 2023, at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus, for an event that is sure to leave a lasting impression. ∎

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Closer To Normal

The 115th Chicago Auto Show

BY RANDY STERN

There are signs of normalization in 2023. Many of the events that had been put on hold or rescheduled – or even reconfigured – began their return last year. This year promises even more normalization after the COVID-19 Pandemic hit the pause button on the world.

The Chicago Auto Show was one of them. While going full scale in 2020 in its regularly scheduled February slot, the Pandemic caused a scramble to see whether the Chicago Auto Trade Association can hold it in the first place and what it would actually look like at McCormick Place south of The Loop.

The 2021 edition was reconfigured into a mix of indoor and outdoor experiences for that summer. Even with restrictions the shortened Auto Show still attracted its share of visitors and a limited number of journalists and industry people.

The following year saw the show return to its traditional February timeslot. CATA reduced the actual space with many manufacturers holding off exhibiting with concerns about safety and the continued pandemic in the city.

For various reasons, I have been unable to attend the Chicago Auto Show since that 2020 show. It has been at the core of my overall automotive work, working that show every year from 2011. The show helped plan on which vehicles should be featured in *Lavender* and to get a sense on how to cover out own local auto show in the Twin Cities.

For 2023, I have returned to McCormick Place, as CATA welcomed the media to the 115th edition of the Chicago Auto Show.

The City of Chicago opened up both the North and South Halls of McCormick Place for the show again – over a million square feet of vehicles from a number of brands. Included in that space are seven indoor tracks. They range from exhibiting the prowess of the most capable off-roaders in the market to electric vehicle experiences. The latter include a new program that began last year called Chicago Drives Electric, a program out on by CATA to help consumers experience a number of EVs they were considering.

One of the big attractions for visitors – and the media alike – is the Wintrust Super Car exhibit. This features the most desirable automobiles in the world, from brands such as Lamborghini and Rolls-Royce. The exhibit showed off the resurrection of the Lamborghini Countach – essentially a rebodied Aventador made to look almost like the original poster car.

Photos by Randy Stern

The purpose of a major auto show was to introduce us the newest offerings in the market. Big press conferences to trot out the latest wares available within the next few months. Chicago used to be known for the biggest debuts, as it was the first place to show the world some of the industry's icons. That list included the original Mazda MX-5 Miata and the Acura NSX.

This year, we witnessed the arrival of a larger 2024 Toyota Grand Highlander, engineered to accommodate adults in the third row of seats. Subaru also rolled out a revised 2024 Crosstrek, which should be of interest to our demographic. Plus, Volkswagen unveiled their updated Atlas and Atlas Cross Sport for 2024. Those were the noteworthy debuts the Chicago Auto Show hosted.

Going into the show, I had been compiling a list of new vehicles I wanted to see up close. Some of which I had in mind for our magazine. For example, the fifth-generation 2023 Toyota Prius is the latest chapter of one of our community's favorite vehicles. It is lower, sleeker, more powerful, and have sparked many conversations that would change the image of this vanguard of electrified vehicles.

Another vehicle that I was happy to see was the new 2023 Toyota Crown. They replaced the Avalon sedan with a completely new-to-North America all-hybrid "apex" vehicle that looks like a fastback with a hatch. It is really a sedan. It just looks very sleek, something Toyota has been working on in turn if changing up their design philosophy.

Alas, one cannot truly meet their heroes on an auto show floor. We're not talking about that $2.8 Million Lamborghini Countach LPI 800-4 that was mentioned earlier in this article. On a personal level, it was the 2023 Acura Integra.

If you owned something truly special at the most appropriate time in your life and you enjoyed every second behind the wheel, there is always some sort of spark when a new version of that vehicle becomes available. For me, that car was the Integra. I'll explain more when we get one in for this magazine.

By the time this issue comes out, the show's run would be over. However, the Twin Cities Auto Show is just around the corner. It will return to the Minneapolis Convention Center on March 31 – celebrating its 50th anniversary. *Lavender* will have a preview article coming up in our next issue. ∎

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